

Motivating Written Composition

By HELEN RADEMACHER *

"Instead of writing a description, can I write a story?" posed the usually silent Gary in ninth grade English class. I didn't know whether he could or not, but anything was better than nothing, and nothing was the likely alternative if I were to answer him negatively. When I told Gary that he might try a story if he would incorporate some description, Gary's eyes looked alive for the first time that year.

As I proceeded with a discussion of description, I forgot about Gary; I didn't notice that he was writing almost madly, filling page after page with his almost illegible scrawl. During the week Gary seemed engrossed. He was hardly aware of anything in class except his "story." And I was certainly too busy trying to "inspire" the class to pay much attention to Gary.

"Aw, gee, does it *have* to be written in ink?" Gary was back with us. At least he had heard me mention that requirement. After I had assured him that, *of course*, he must write his theme in ink, he was resigned, but somewhat reluctant. "It might be late, then," he reported. "This is a pretty long story, and it's not finished yet." He seemed excited about his literary *coup*, but the significance of his enthusiasm passed me by.

Not until the descriptions and Gary's "story" came to me for checking did I realize what he had done. *He had copied!* I was shocked. How could he do that in *my* class? Naturally, I indignantly and self-righteously attacked his plagiarism, and Gary was properly squelched.

How often we see the light when it's too late. I realize now that actually it was my fault that Gary copied his "story." I know now that I hadn't been able (or couldn't be bothered) to help him write an original story. I wish it weren't too late to repair the damage,

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but Gary has graduated from junior high. He slipped from his English class with a "D—" and an intense hatred for English.

Not all my students have had a reluctance to write or even a dislike for English. Many have written beautiful, well-constructed compositions, but I think that they would have done that anyway. Those exceptional few students are found in almost every class, and no matter how much damage or how great the good the teacher does, they always emerge unscathed and pure.

But those paragons of literary virtue are not my problem now. I must find a way to reach the others.

After much soul-searching, I tend to agree with Cassius: "The fault, dear (teacher), lies not in our stars, but in ourselves that we are underlings . . ." Purging our souls is good only if we profit by it. If we see our basic weaknesses and attempt to compensate for them, even eliminate them, we shall be better teachers, and our students will be better students.

"Upon the teacher himself, finally depends the success of a course in composition. He cannot presume on the fallacy, common nowadays, that cheap pedagogic methods can take the place of the awareness both of the subject matter of writing and of the students at work on it. Nor can he dull-wittedly belabor his class with the abstract principles of unity, coherence, and emphasis, ordering them through the movements of the sentence, paragraph, and theme as if they were a squad at drill . . . He (the teacher) must be experienced of life, mindful of history, read in both contemporary and older literature, and curious toward the progress by which man creates art."¹

That's a big order, Mr. Lloyd, but can we be satisfied with less? Teachers' complacency is unfortunately commonplace.

Lou La Brant sounded the call to arms in *We Teach English* when she said: "We have no right as teachers of language to promote irresponsible, purposeless writing. In an age when every individual must share in making decisions of local, national, and international scope, the school cannot rightly foster the notion that producing papers which are merely 'correctly' done is the major aim of the language course."² Actually, we teachers of English have much freedom to do as we please in our classrooms. When we feel restricted by textbooks, courses of study, and time limitations, we fail to realize just how effective we can make our textbooks and courses of study. We can regulate time if we have the desire; we must make the most of what little time we have. To give

¹ Lloyd, C. T., *On the Teaching of English Composition*, Atlantic Monthly Company, page 12.

² La Brant, Lou, *We Teach English*, Harcourt, Brace, 1951, pages 147, 148.

up because we are beset with problems largely created by ourselves is to admit that we are not fit to teach.

If at times we are bewildered, consider our students. Our dilemma is inevitably reflected in their attitudes toward English. If our approach is alive and confident, so then will be theirs. Phyllis Robbins stated the problem neatly: "The bane of nearly every young student is the task in composition. A subject is given him and instantly he feels injured and put upon. In a sense he is right. It is not enough to give a pupil a subject; we must arouse his interest—give him also what is between himself and his subject: *inter-est*."³

One cannot stress too emphatically the role of the teacher in the success of his students' written work. The teacher's personality, his attitude, and his performance in class play a direct part in the quality of work done by his students. Smugness, complacency, and superiority have no place in the English teacher's classroom presentation. Neither do drabness, sullenness, or lifelessness belong in the classroom. James T. Blandford of Iowa State Teachers College pinpoints the problem when he says: "... too often the classroom performance of a teacher, which can be his best teaching technique, is his poorest. No matter how much of a scholar a teacher is, and no matter how much educational psychology he knows or how well versed in method he may be, he will not be able to teach his students much unless he can get them interested in the material he is teaching. . . . A teacher will spend a great deal of time in developing elaborate motivating devices but yet fail to spend time in developing the best motivating device of all—namely, himself."⁴

Amusing, yet pertinent, is the example, cited by Blandford, of the teacher in the midst of a unit on short story writing. While standing before her class, the teacher, as well as the students, seemed startled when a man rushed into the room, kissed the teacher, and then hurried from the room without a word. After recovering from her "surprise," the teacher turned to the class and informed them that they had witnessed the ending of a short story and that they were to construct the beginning as their assignment for the next day.⁵

I shudder when I think of what might happen in certain communities if a teacher were to try the kissing technique of motivation in her English class. But that teacher who dared to employ such a dramatic device will probably never be forgotten by her classes. One might even venture to guess that the students who tackled that

³ Robbins, Phyllis, *Incentives to Composition; an Approach to Writing through Subject Stimulus*, Harvard University Press, 1936, page 8.

⁴ Blandford, J. T., "Humanizing the Teacher," *Balance Sheet*, volume 35, December, 1953, pages 150-151.

⁵ *Ibid.*, page 151.

short story assignment worked with more relish and delight than they had ever before experienced.

Why shouldn't an English teacher be dramatic? Why shouldn't he laugh and be dynamically alive in his classes? English is not a "dead" language; why should its teachers appear so?

I have a sneaking suspicion that the dramatics teacher would be eager to co-operate with the English teacher in contriving some dramatic presentations before a class concentrating upon composition. Planning dramatic episodes should be kept secret from the English class since the element of surprise lends much to freshness and originality in writing. Why not, for example, when teaching the use of details and description in written composition, plan carefully with the dramatics teacher and two students the following scene? The door bursts open; a girl, pursued by a boy waving a gun, rushes into the room. She might dash to the back of the room, still pursued, and then make wildly for the door. After the boy races out, and the class recuperates, the teacher might ask the class to write just exactly what they saw. The teacher should have, in advance, worked out details of costume, make-up, and action. There will probably be much difference in opinion concerning color of hair, in which hand the boy carried the gun, and what the characters were wearing.

Dramatization is only one of many motivating techniques used by experienced and successful teachers. For the beginning teacher and for the experienced teacher, as well, there are frequently cited in *The English Journal*, *Clearing House*, *National Education Association Journal*, and the *Illinois English Bulletin* good examples of effective devices used for motivating composition.

Most successful teachers of English agree that it isn't easy to write a good composition. Lou La Brant suggests that the teacher who writes is one who most successfully teaches writing. How many of us could fulfill the assignments we require of our students? Perhaps it would be a good idea for us to write a description when we require one; to write a book review when we assign one; to relate a personal narrative when we suggest one.

It may not be essential for the teacher to write for publication, but think of the boundless enthusiasm he would impart to his classes if he were fortunate enough to have something published. It might conceivably be only a letter to an editor; even that dubious achievement is exhilarating. If a teacher could be prompted to teach composition more effectively because of "professional" literary accomplishments, one can imagine the thrill which comes to a student when he sees his own limerick printed in the *Illinois English Bulletin*. He may even go so far as to abandon the limerick and concentrate upon the sonnet or free verse.

Whether a student's composition is a piece of writing, so many words in length, written to satisfy the whims of a tyrannical teacher (or a teacher so limited in scope that he resorts to the one-theme-a-week theory) or whether a composition is a sincere expression of student creation depends, to a great extent, upon the type of classroom atmosphere and student-teacher relationships developed in the class.

Most experts agree that presented with the opportunity, conditions conducive to writing, and friendly, sincere encouragement, boys and girls will write eagerly. To share their experiences is of primary importance to junior and senior high school students; consider the between-class chatter which would tend to create the idea that Jim, Susie, Jane, and Bill hadn't seen each other for six months, instead of only forty minutes. To channel and direct student experience and to help students see that what they do is worthy of written composition is the tremendous task of the English teacher.

It is of paramount importance, then, for the English teacher to create a friendly relationship between himself and his students. What can be done to insure such a condition?

One teacher, an advocate of the humor-in-the-classroom theory, has found great success in his classes by emphasizing the humorous, the ridiculous, the absurd. According to him, "Teachers need a philosophy of laugh and let laugh."⁶

Many teachers, it seems, are distrustful of laughter. They fear that laughter will upset a pattern of decorum which keeps the pupils "in line." But the class which sits silently before the firm, unsmiling teacher seldom produces stimulated, sincere composition. To be completely fair, it should be noted that, perhaps, many teachers who do not seem to unbend are unsure of themselves and unacquainted with techniques for making their classes warm and friendly without resulting in pandemonium. For many teachers, however, good humor is the best antidote to the urge to misbehave in class. The student who is pleasantly occupied will not find it necessary to unleash his energies in unprofitable, if not unacceptable, behavior.

While laughter is good motivation for friendly classroom relations, one should not depend upon it entirely. Most experts agree that it is essential, before actually writing composition, to establish a certain *rappor*t between the teacher and his students. *Rappor*t is not likely when the teacher, in making an assignment, says, "Tomorrow have ready a theme about something that interests you." Most students at the adolescent stage don't know what their interests are. Actually, they are reaching the period when they are

⁶ Warren, J. E., "English Teacher As a Humorist," *Clearing House*, volume 24, October, 1949, page 85.

vitality interested in more things than they can possibly be aware of. They are full of life and energy; they want to know much, and they want to know it quickly. How can a boy who delights in sports, tropical fish, photography, and sports cars possibly write a theme about something that interests him? Where would he start? He may have only a smattering of knowledge concerning his interests, but a generalized assignment can be as deadening as novocain when he attempts to reduce his somewhat immature thoughts to "two pages, written in ink, due tomorrow."

If students are unaware of their interests and personal resources, we, as teachers, must show them how to harness their spirited literary stallions and put them to work without destroying the spirit.

When students protest: "But nothing interesting ever happens to me," the teacher must pull out of his bag of tricks everything he can to make them realize that it is the little things which make life interesting. Perhaps one could promote a lucrative discussion by asking what things students talk about as they chat in the corridor, or as they walk home. Discussion, it seems, is invaluable in motivating written composition. If a teacher finds, as he often does, that his students are afraid or reluctant to enter a discussion concerning themselves, he could relate a personal incident or express a personal opinion, himself. I have found it quite useful to tell about the time a group of us was going to a Sunday school picnic when the convertible which wouldn't convert got stuck in the mud in a rainstorm. My students like to hear how I stupidly lost my front tooth and about my fear of the dentist. I like to tell them that I wrote "Colonel Snooper," the gossip column in the school paper.

Students are amazed to find that teachers are not always "squares." There isn't a more appropriate way of expressing it, according to the present-day student body. Not so long ago we were "jerks"; what epithet we shall acquire next year depends largely upon the ability of youngsters to adapt themselves to jargon originated and circulated by adults lacking an acquaintance with English as we attempt to teach it.

Teen-agers are particularly adept at "sizing-up" a teacher; they are quick to take advantage of the teacher who goes overboard in an attempt to establish himself as a "good Joe." For this reason we must give careful consideration to our relationship with our students and our approach to subject matter.

It is essential, I think, for the teacher to respect himself and his abilities. It is equally important for him to respect his students. If he has no confidence in himself as a teacher, he will tend to see nothing worthy in his students.

In order to establish a productive relationship with his students, the teacher must convince them that he knows a great deal about life—much of it on the level of student experience. He may be surprised, but he must never be shocked by many student comments. His righteous indignation should be carefully channeled and meted out effectively—not exploded, but explained. *The best way to motivate is not to alienate.*

Alienation is almost certain when a teacher fails to instill the confidence of the students in him. He should not let them down by failing to respect their confidences. Under no circumstances should a teacher read before the class a theme for which a student has requested secrecy.

Likewise, by making clear the reason for a composition assignment the teacher assures productivity rather than static immobility. We all co-operate better when we realize *why* we are asked to perform a certain task. "A teacher of English should never teach anything that he himself does not consider valuable, and he should never teach anything without letting students see at least part of the value that it has."⁷

Fortunately there has been a great deal of material published concerning motivating techniques for written composition. In the wealth of published information one can find many specific suggestions of inestimable value. That one could not attempt all of them is obvious. On the other hand, it is logical to assume that one can gain much by learning about the ideas tried and successfully used by others. If one were to find, after sifting through the scores of ideas, that he could utilize ten or twelve of them, he has profited.

The teacher in quest of additional ideas could talk personally with others on his faculty and to those who, he knows, have been outstanding in the field of written composition. Students today are not in the least reluctant to commend or condemn their teachers. The student-commended teacher is frequently the one who could be of great help to one attempting to better his own teaching method. It seems to me that English teachers should be happy to share their ideas.

Where could one find a better gathering of minds than at the English departmental meetings? Unfortunately such meetings scheduled, shall we say, at 3:30 are conducted so that the members can race from the building at 3:50. Too frequently we fail to see the real value of a teachers' meeting—an opportunity to share successful methods. (There are three things I like to share: good books, good humor, and good teaching practices. In sharing the last, I usually receive, rather than impart, the information.)

⁷ Hook, J. N., *The Teaching of High School English*, The Ronald Press Company, 1950, page 257.

The remainder of this paper will be devoted to the listing and discussion of specific ideas for motivating written composition.

1. One of the most frequently used methods for opening a composition unit is that of the student autobiography. Naturally, to be effective, the assignment must be more than a carelessly tossed "Write an autobiography." Perhaps the teacher could preface the assignment with a few autobiographical remarks about himself. To illustrate the idea of written composition he could write his own autobiography and read it to the class. One can't merely ask for an autobiography and expect to get one from every member of the class. Before making the assignment, the teacher should know exactly what he wants and should make clear to his students what is expected of them and why. Such specific assignments might result in prolific fulfillment.

Preliminary planning, on the part of the teacher, is necessary before the first assignment can be made. We shall probably all agree that although motivation requires effort, the results are worth every bit of energy expended. Perhaps a specific plan for developing the autobiography could be placed upon the blackboard. Why not plan like this?

- I. My family (how they affect me and how I affect them)
- II. Myself (what has made me the person I am)
- III. My leisure time (how I spend it)
- IV. My ambitions (what I want to be and why)

In addition to the outline suggestions, one could ask some questions without giving students the opportunity to answer them orally. They will then find it necessary to include their answers in the written assignment. Some typical questions might very well be: Did you ever run away? Were you ever lost? Have you had your tonsils removed? Did you ever win a prize? Have you seen a tornado?

If the preliminary planning and the presentation are carefully done and if it is made sufficiently clear to the students that there will be no grading of these first papers, the results are likely to be pleasantly surprising.

If we encourage the students to "let themselves go" in their first assignment, there will be some who continue rolling the rest of the year. At the same time it is important to assure the students that their autobiographies will be confidential.

If, at first, we are alarmed at the abundance of errors made, we should not worry. Correction of errors, according to many successful teachers, can come in written composition only after the desire to write has been established. "The very wildness of spirit which runs away with ideas and takes them on untried paths takes them

away also from the narrow roads of approved grammar and spelling. Under wise guidance anyone who has anything to say can be helped to say it correctly. The trouble with us teachers is that we spend so many hours helping pupils who have said nothing to say it better. Correctness in regard to detail comes when a writer gets a powerful incentive to write well. Even children want only their best selves on display in the class story book or the school newspaper . . . Creativity, like flowers, is apt to run wild at first—to be later domesticated through pride in a garden.”⁸

2. Several teachers have found that students react most readily to a discussion of those things which bother them—their “gripes.” These teachers advance the theory that students write easily about their complaints. Consider adults, especially teachers; teachers’ *tête à tête*s are often nothing more than a formal sanctioning of educational “gripes.” Usually nothing is accomplished except the improvement of a particular teacher’s ability to wail the loudest and the longest. Like adult ravings the student themes may not accomplish much; but if the students develop a restraint-free desire to write, then, perhaps, it has not been in vain. For this reason especially do some teachers encourage students to discuss and to write about such topics as “Mother and Dad expect me in too early at night”; “Children should be seen, not heard. This gripes me. Nobody cares what I think”; “We never have any fun in this school.”

3. Another suggestion for the early assignment in composition is the use of the stream-of-consciousness style. Let the students write whatever occurs to them without adhering to a previously announced topic.

4. Closely allied with the above suggestion is one used by many teachers: a notebook or journal kept by the student in which he writes thoughts—even whole paragraphs—which occur to him at any time. From these notebooks, which the teacher reads from time to time and which are never graded, come ideas which can be expanded later into a full-length composition.

5. Many teachers believe that the quality of composition will be improved if most of the actual writing is done in class in an informal, easy atmosphere with the teacher available to assist those who require assistance. That present-day home conditions are usually not conducive to quiet, thoughtful composition is becoming more obvious. Home conditions have changed so much in the last few years that it has become virtually impossible for students to work at home.

⁸ Applegate, Mauree, *Helping Children Write*, International Textbook Company, 1949, page 101.

The classroom atmosphere, therefore, in addition to the teacher's relationship to the student, must be a motivating factor, itself. Contributing to the creative atmosphere of the classroom can be accomplished in several ways. One teacher places pictures upon the bulletin board. But she goes further than this: she prints under or beside the picture appropriate comments and questions which will provoke thoughtful consideration and, perhaps, result in an inspired composition.

Effective display of artistic masterpieces and an appropriate discussion of them have been used by many teachers to motivate written composition.

The teacher who draws poorly might make good use of stick figures to illustrate ideas for themes. A picture could be drawn upon the board after which the class could suggest appropriate titles. As a result of closely examining the pictures, most students would think of at least one or two ideas for their paragraphs and themes.

Alice Murray, writing in the *English Journal*, tells how she develops a classroom atmosphere by suggesting to her students that they imagine themselves in separate "islands of silence." She accomplishes this largely by suggesting that the students move their chairs wherever they wish and create for themselves an atmosphere of silence. She points out that this is not a new experience for them, that they have done it before, probably in church, by a lake, or in the woods.⁹

6. Among many specific devices for promoting good written composition is the use of films to provide a common motivation for the entire class. To use films as a model for narration or short story writing is an obvious way to stimulate creativity. Films about social problems could lead to a discussion of controversial issues resulting in inspired exposition. Colored travel films might easily fire the imagination to describe a sunset or a Swiss chalet.

7. In the teaching of description the teacher might suggest a game in which each student would write a paragraph describing some member of the class. After reading the descriptions aloud, the students could then declare as winner the team, or person, who had correctly identified the most members of the class.

8. After a discussion of a mass disaster involving many hundreds of people (as in a flood or drought area) asking students to imagine how one person might feel under those conditions might furnish the basis for narrative, descriptive, or expository themes.

⁹ Murray, A. I., "From an Island of Silence," *English Journal*, volume 42, October, 1953, page 382.

9. One of the best motivating devices is the reading of student models. For several years I have used the student models published annually in the *Illinois English Bulletin*. Last year I had a stroke of luck when re-reading some of the examples from an issue published in 1946. In that issue I discovered a theme written by one of the younger men on our faculty—a young man much loved and respected by his students. The interest which resulted when I announced the name of the author would be difficult to describe. That accidental motivation was one of the most satisfactory I experienced during the entire year.

Along with reading student models of composition published in various periodicals, one of the best sources of good student writing is the teacher's own file into which he places the best themes written by his students. Reading those themes is of great value; but of even greater value is the reaction of students who know that if they work hard enough, their themes may be included in the teacher's file to be read next year and in the years to come.

10. In the teaching of business letter-writing, many teachers have found that a collection of authentic letters given to them by friends in the business world is a positive device for the study and motivation of writing business correspondence. I have in my own file what I think is the classic example of the worst business letter ever written in the history of mankind. Written several years ago to my father, this letter, dog-eared and tattered from its place of importance in my classes, has more errors per square inch than anything I have ever received from a student. My students never fail to appreciate my points when discussing, in this case, how *not* to write a business letter.

One might well make use of the opaque projector to show examples of good and bad business or social correspondence. The use of authentic examples seems to engender more interest than the scores of letters reproduced in textbooks.

11. To develop conciseness, clarity, and originality one teacher clips advertisements from magazines, deletes the printed material, and asks the students to write the missing parts.

12. A class or school literary magazine furnishes much motivation for good writing. The type of publication possible depends, of course, upon the resources available—including money, teachers' time, and school time. Student talent is usually available and eager.

13. Controversial articles, read aloud and discussed in class, provide much material for student prose.

14. For narration, the teacher could begin a plot and let the students finish it.

15. Bringing in outside speakers not only adds variety to classroom procedures, but also gives students an opportunity to take notes and to write letters of appreciation to the speakers.

16. One of the most psychologically effective phases of motivating written composition comes *after* the act of writing has been completed. A student may be stimulated by what his teacher writes upon his paper; or he may become discouraged by cryptic, often meaningless remarks he finds there. That our students should develop a wholesome attitude toward their work is an objective held dear by most teachers. It is important for our students to realize that their teachers see good points, few as they may be, in student work. True motivation results when students understand, appreciate, and utilize the suggestions offered by their teachers who see more than the mistakes.

"If you see only the mistakes on the paper, you are not yet ready to be a teacher of creative writing . . . Remember that we love to look at our achievements . . . Pride in one's attainments is a powerful incentive to correct spelling and sentence structure."¹⁰ A paper obliterated by red marks indicating errors has convinced one teacher to use a red pencil to indicate not errors but achievements. Others have suggested using blue pencils for marking achievements or making marginal comments.

I feel, however, that the color of the lead pencil is not nearly so important as the quality of the remarks rendered by the teacher. We should make marginal comments personal and genuinely helpful. Alfred M. Hitchcock, in his *Bread Loaf Talks on Teaching Composition*, cites the following as constructive comments: "There's a fine phrase; you could not have chosen a better. But notice how you have tucked it away. Give it a chance; don't hide it. Here's a good place. See how it shines when you put it in the sun." "Do you mean what you say in this sentence? Of course not. A miss is as bad as a mile. Fix the sentence quickly before anyone sees what a blunder you have made."¹¹

Time? Of course, it takes time to mark carefully every student's paper. But I have a feeling that it's worth every minute of the time we give it.

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Although there are scores of motivating devices used by teachers of English composition, the most potent techniques are useless unless the teacher himself is cognizant of his own potentialities. Upon the teacher rests the responsibility. Unless he has the desire

¹⁰ Applegate, *op. cit.*, page 101.

¹¹ Hitchcock, Alfred M., *Bread Loaf Talks on Teaching Composition*, Holt, 1927, page 77.

to teach composition and has that desire earnestly and sincerely, little will be accomplished; students will be short-changed. If he does possess the desire to teach effectively, he will undoubtedly examine his own attitudes, personality, and capabilities. In his self-scrutiny if he finds weaknesses and does everything he can to eliminate them, he will most surely improve, and his students will reap the benefits. Then will true motivation result.

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BOOKS WE LIKE

The February issue of the ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN will be the long-awaited reading list of *Books We Like*. In more than 70 tightly-packed pages it will list the books that Illinois high school students have selected as their favorites. Each title will have an annotation written by a student.

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The issues devoted to best student poetry and prose will appear this year in March and April.

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The *Illinois English Bulletin* needs for next year a considerable number of short or medium-long articles about teaching experiences that have brought worthwhile results in the classroom. What are your favorite teaching tactics and strategy? What methods have brought you best results in teaching a particular piece of literature? Have you done any research that your fellow teachers should know about? Are there any unusual developments in the teaching of English in your school?

Send your manuscripts or questions about possible manuscripts to the Editor, J. N. Hook, 121 Lincoln Hall, Urbana, Illinois.

